

◆Gloria Yung Yu “CHICKEN FEET & trump”

5AM. Could not sleep. Had to write this. It is about the CHICKEN FEET & trump. My first and last sentence: Asians, do NOT use the MSP airport as your entry point to the U.S, ever, unless you want to experience Racism.

Going through American immigration security point was never a pleasant experience- but never too bad. The officers pulled out records, looked through them on the computer, typed in information, and ask short questions. Most of the time was silent waiting, especially when they are in bad moods. Usually, they returned your file with a “welcome to the U.S.” For the past ten years, I got fewer questions as my record is piled up with student visas.

This time, MSP was completely different. While lining up I was watching how the six white, bald males questioned visa-exempted Japanese visitors in loud, rude tones and words, and used hand gestures I saw in American movies of prisons. They let every white person pass in a second, be American or not. Soon there were all Asians left. This white, middle-aged, bald and out-of-shape male officer asked many random questions that I have never heard from any other officers. He interrupted and dismissed my answers, jumped to other random questions, and then asked the very same thing again. While I was patient with his endless, absurd and rude-toned questioning, I began to wonder: what he is trying to do here, to lock me up in the notorious "small room" for further questioning?

After many questions, he paused and began to flip through every single page of my passport, which has stamps from many other countries.

"Why do you have so many American visas?"

"Because the U.S asked Chinese citizens to re-apply yearly, until recently." 200 dollars each time.

I was patient- had to. He could randomly deny my entry and he certainly knew his power. He then took out a ballpoint pen and began to cross lines on my past stamps, one by one, while complaining about why I kept them. I had two passports full of American stamps and none of the officers had ever done this. Now I am watching him drawing lines on my only legal document and I had to stop him, literally, before he pinned the pen to my current visa.

When other officers passed three or four people, he seemed to run out questions and gave up (I was wrong- it was the beginning).

"So where are you from? china?" Isn't that the first thing you saw on my passport?

"Yes."

"How many bags do you have?" He just asked this before the nationality question.

"One."

"One...Did you bring any food?" This is usually the customs officer's question.

"No."

"NO?"

"No. Did not have any time."

He squinted.

"No MOONCAKES?"

MOONCAKES. MOONCAKES not on a mid-autumn day. December. Chinese. On board the WTF roller coaster.

"Mooncakes? Why? No."

"Really?"

"No. I flew from Japan."

"No? ...No mooncakes, No CHICKEN FEET?"

CHICKEN FEET. Oh My God. CHICKEN FEET. The triumph word.

Every single Chinese has to smuggle exotic and grotesque food into the great America, since the nineteenth century.

I was not even given the right to point out his wrong knowledge and very wrong morals. Because he is the authority and I am a foreigner so I had to answer the CHICKEN FEET.

"No. I DID NOT BRING ANY CHICKEN FEET"

"Really? You didn't bring anything LIKE chicken feet?"

"look, I have been here for almost ten years, " he cut my words,

"But THEY still bring, no matter ten years or more they still bring chicken feet."

"Not me."

"I am not making this up, THEY do bring those stuff here, we have seen this, THEY bring."

His murmur faded away as my body and brain resonant with the word "THEY"

We have seen some Mexican illegal immigrants, so we ask every single Mexican person if he/she is an illegal immigrant. Because you know, they are.

We have seen some Black criminals, so we ask every single Black person if he/she is a criminal. Because you know, they are.

Why I was wondering people voted Trump before. OF COURSE.

"Not me." I just want to leave the country now.

"... okay. Take your files, pick up your bag, and get your bag checked there."

Was "welcome to America" a protocol or pure niceness- I don't know and I don't care. I picked up the files he threw back on the table and headed to the customs.

The customs officer asked: did you bring any food? No. NO? any vegetables? Apples? No. meat? No. raw fish? No. xxyyzz. No.

"Okay, go to that blue line to get your bag checked for agricultural XYZ."

If you are not going to believe my words, why ask?

One young woman was explaining about a small heating pad (characters written in Japanese) to the officer and later she came to say thank you after she repacked everything. The officer did not respond, turned around and murmured: "you'd better be." He grabbed my documents, "you, load the bag, follow the yellow line. " The bag passed and the officer came out with my document: have a nice day. The next international plane arrived- many white people. every single of them with huge bags passed without being redirected to the X-ray line.

Go to hell. No excuses or tolerance. I refuse to label this as a "General Rudeness of the Immigration Bureau" because IT IS NOT. There is no discussion of the "good" heart when we both know we are not equal. I was humiliated with my hands tied.

You think I am overreacting? Picture this: an American is asked by a Japanese or Chinese customs officer: "did you bring any cowboy hats? Frozen turkey? Smelly cheese?"

Imagine what the American will say. Then continue to picture: when the American says no. "really? All the Americans always bring weird, disgusting American food- they always do."

If in my twenties I would probably just say back to the officer: "do you know we can buy chicken/duck/turkey feet in supermarkets in NYC now? all flavors, organic, made in America."

But now I know, being sarcastic does not work fighting racism.

I also know that I would not encounter this question ten years ago when I first came to the U.S.- people although had a strong bias, were generally open to conversations, and were willing to change their minds and acknowledge differences.

For the past ten years, I tried to fight hard against racism, misogyny, and xenophobia in both foreign lands and my native country. I also tried to contribute to the cultural diversity of these communities by engaging with discussions on Asian culture, society, and politics.

The chicken feet question that I did not get in my twenties, I got it in 2016.

Americans are diverse, yes. There are many good people out there. True. However, the real diversity is mutual: to acknowledge that the Chinese, Japanese, and any other ethnic groups are as DIVERSE as the Americans. Otherwise, there is no difference between the Japanese colonial Manchuria State in the 1930s, a land of “harmonious coexistence of five faces” and a hypocritical “diverse” America, where the co-existence of multiple races is preconditioned on the hierarchical placement of different races with the white on the top, the Chinese in Chinatown kitchens, and the Mexicans on delivery bicycles.

Before I stepped out of the security zone, I looked back at these authorities. They think and act like they are doing the righteous thing- protecting the country. Their racist tone is justified under the name of patriotism. That gave me chills. The election result provides justifications for being unkind to foreigners, to cast random doubts, and to humiliate them because they are suspects of illegal immigrants and stealers of the “great” America. I hate the “great” America.

I sit on the transfer plane to NYC, very quiet. A man put his bag in the cabinet and sit down next to me, “how’re you doing” he greeted me nicely.

I could not hold my tears.

The first time I came to the U.S in 2006, on the transfer plane heading to Pittsburgh, I was greeted with exactly the same words. I remembered describing this to my father: the Americans are so nice.

After the election, I cried for days, read all articles in English, Chinese and Japanese, and reached my conclusion: I will pursue a teaching position in East Asian Art history at an American college, be it in the Middle West or countryside, because someone needs to fight, and fight hard. I always have faith in education.

But today, I am done with this country. I am defeated.

Asians, DO NOT use the MSP airport as your entry point to the U.S. We lost the battle.

P.S The Aftermath

It was too much to hold back. Within the 48 hours after the incident, I filed fact-only complaints to the U.S. Customs and Border Protection and MSP airport, and wrote letters to the University president and ISSO. Nothing would change, I knew. But I did my share of fight. Fighting, however, did not make me feel better. I was still defeated, emotionally destroyed, and slid into a deeper depression.

I did not respond to comments from Facebook or messages:

“Crossing the border was never a pleasant experience, even for a white guy like me;”

“Asking chicken feet was a protocol for asking the signature food of your country;”

“What a bad guy;”

“Did you just realize the hypocritical nature of the Americans now? Why are you overacting this time?”

I also did not know how to react to people telling me more stories of horrifying mistreatments of the Asians at U.S. borders after the election.

My brain processed the facts and analyzed why and how people threw out biased judgments based on their own perspectives and experiences. I noticed that the border officers’ union, the National Border Patrol Council, made its first presidential endorsement for Trump. Also, for every single racist encounter, happened in the past ten years, I questioned myself: was it my emotional over-reaction? For many time, including this time, the answer was No.

I was depressed. The moment when I saw many white faces on the transferring plane to the NYC, my first instinct was: GOD these racists people from the mid-west all voted for Trump. The irrational but strong feeling scared me. I experienced how these negative feelings flooded and blocked my mind, destroyed my faith, and made a black hole in my heart. Emotions do matter. Fundamentally, it was not the lack of literacy, but the failure to handle emotions of scares and anxieties- that made tons of American people cast their decisive ballots for Trump.

A week later I talked to the ISSO director, who decided to follow up the case with the MSP border control officer. After he settled the follow-up matter, he looked at me and asked, “Now, we need to talk about you.”

“How do you feel?”

That was the moment I realized why I was depressed. Because to fight, is different from to heal. I was traumatized and my wounds hurt.

“We want you to heal from this.”

Surprisingly, it was also the very moment that I realized; I will be healed, no matter how bad it is now. Many people’s kind words and encouragements, which I have received in the past week, came to light, and for the first time, I got the strength to deal with the trauma without burdening myself down with anger, sadness and disappointment.

“What shall we do in the post-election era?” Fight. And heal yourself by reaching out to your people with support. It is hard and painful. But we have to do this to survive the upcoming harsh reality.